



National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

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Frequently Asked Questions about Rock Creek Park's Deer Management Plan November 2016

What is this plan about?

An overabundant white-tailed deer population is damaging the forest in Rock Creek Park. To address this situation, the National Park Service (NPS) has developed a deer management strategy that supports long-term protection, preservation, and restoration of native vegetation and cultural landscapes.

When proposing a management action of this scope, the National Park Service must follow the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA). This law requires all federal agencies to: (1) prepare in-depth studies of the impacts of, and alternatives to, a proposed major federal action; (2) use the information developed from these studies to decide whether to proceed with the action; and (3) diligently attempt to involve the interested and affected public before any decision affecting the environment is made.

What is the problem?

Deer eat a wide variety of items, including tree and shrub seedlings. In a self-sustaining forest of this age (about 125 years), there would be a wide range of native trees in all stages of life, from seedling to sapling to mature. There also would be an understory layer of herbaceous (non-woody) plants, including a variety of wildflowers, and native shrubs. At Rock Creek Park, this vital mix is missing. The population of deer is now so great that it has compromised the ability of native forests to regenerate.

In addition, over the past 20 years, the increased deer population has caused detrimental changes in the species composition, structure, abundance, and distribution of native plant communities and their associated wildlife. Deer now are so dominant in the environment that they have decreased the habitat for other species.

Why have you been studying this problem for so long?

When a federal agency proposes to undertake a major action, it must identify the reason for a proposed action and ensure that the problem is documented with data so that the outcome is firmly informed by science. As part of this NEPA-mandated process, the National Park Service has been collecting and analyzing information since 1991 about how the park's vegetation and deer population have been changing. This ensures that a responsible, science-informed decision is reached and that all stakeholders, including the public, have a role in the planning process.

Have you already decided on the method? If so, what is it?

After extensive analysis, the National Park Service identified a preferred alternative in the Final Deer Management Plan/Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS). This alternative involves a combination of lethal and non-lethal methods that would lower the park's deer population and then keep it stabilized at a level that allows the park's vegetation to recover over time. After the release of the FEIS in January 2012, the National Park Service issued a Record of Decision in May 2012. This Record of Decision documents approval of the plan, selects the alternative to be implemented, and sets forth stipulations required for implementation. It was signed by the Director of the National Park Service's National Capital Region on May 1, 2012.

Will you consider reproductive control or other options?

Yes. The National Park Service fully evaluated the advantages, disadvantages, effectiveness, and costs of using reproductive control as part of two deer management alternatives: Alternative B (Combined Non-lethal Actions) and Alternative D (Combined Lethal and Nonlethal Actions). Alternative D is the preferred alternative.

Under Alternative D, if a chemical reproductive control method is available that meets the criteria set forth in the FEIS, reproductive control would be implemented when the target deer population level has been achieved. If an acceptable reproductive control method is not available or is ineffective, the park would continue lethal control methods to maintain the deer population at the level that permits forest regeneration.

Appendix C of the FEIS provides a comprehensive scientific overview of the status of reproductive control. This appendix has been reviewed by wildlife reproductive science experts. National Park Service staff revised and updated information on reproductive control in the FEIS based on their comments.

How can citizens be involved in this process?

The public involvement part of the FEIS is completed. The NPS fully involved the public throughout the process, with two public scoping meetings in 2006, and by making the draft plan available for public and agency review and comment from July 13 through November 2, 2009. A public meeting was also held in September 2009 to obtain feedback about the plan from the public.

Why don't you allow hunting at the park to control the deer population?

Hunting isn't allowed in a national park unless it was specifically authorized in the legislation that established the park or by any subsequent law. The 1890 law establishing Rock Creek Park did not authorize hunting.

Would you support legislation authorizing hunting at Rock Creek Park for this purpose?

It's not appropriate for park staff to advocate legislation. This is a privilege that remains in the public's hands.

Who decides on the management alternative?

The director of the National Park Service's National Capital Region signed the Record of Decision on May 1, 2012, which documents approval of the plan, selects the alternative to be implemented, and sets forth stipulations required for implementation.

When can you begin to implement this plan?

The National Park Service has already implemented the plan, which was finalized with the signing of the Record of Decision on May 1, 2012. In March 2013, expert sharpshooters removed 20 deer, completing the first year of management operations. In the winter of 2013-2014, 106 deer were removed. In the fall and winter of 2014-2015, 55 deer were removed. Deer management was continued in the fall and winter of 2015-2016 with the removal of 26 deer. Deer management operations will continue in the future to manage the deer population at a level that allows for forest regeneration. In addition to lethal management operations, park staff will continue existing management practices. These practices include maintaining fences around newly planted areas, enforcing the speed limit on park roads, monitoring the park's deer population and vegetation, and providing information to help people better understand the problem.

How many deer are there in Rock Creek Park?

Deer population density surveys conducted by park staff in the fall of 2015 determined that there were 19 deer per square mile in Rock Creek Park. Deer population density counts for 2016 will be conducted in November, 2016.

What do you think is the right number of deer for Rock Creek Park?

A population density of between 15-20 deer per square mile will allow the park's forest to regenerate successfully. This number was determined by a team of scientists and specialists from a variety of state and federal agencies, based in part on a review of recent studies conducted in forests similar to those in Rock Creek Park. The National Park Service formed this team to provide technical information and input during the planning process.

How long will it take to reduce the deer population?

The target density was achieved in 2015 but continued removal of deer will be necessary to maintain deer numbers at the target population level. It may take six or more years from the start of deer management operations for vegetation growth to recover to the point where forest regeneration is sustainable.

Where will the deer management actions take place?

Through the spring of 2017, the National Park Service plans to conduct deer management actions in the main section of Rock Creek Park from the National Zoo north to the District of Columbia/Maryland boundary between Oregon Avenue, NW and 16th Street, NW to maintain target population levels in the main section of Rock Creek Park. The NPS also may extend deer management action to additional areas managed by Rock Creek Park -- such as Melvin Hazen Park, Soapstone Valley Park, Pinehurst Parkway, and other tributary parks, as well as, Glover-Archbold Park, Battery Kemble Park and Fort Totten Park -- to reduce deer populations.

If the park controls deer, but no other areas around the park do, will this plan work? The National Park Service's goal is to coordinate our efforts with other jurisdictions and agencies so they will be as effective as possible. Deer overpopulation is an issue shared by communities throughout the metropolitan area. A regional response is essential to the success of this plan. This response is already occurring in Montgomery County, Maryland, where local park authorities are conducting deer management sharpshooting in the areas north of Rock Creek Park's District of Columbia/Maryland boundary.

Are you coordinating with the District of Columbia and Maryland?

Yes. The National Park Service has worked with District of Columbia Department of Health, the Department of the Environment, and the Maryland National Capital Parks and Planning Commission to develop this management plan. The park will continue to coordinate with these agencies as needed in the future.

What will you do if this plan doesn't work?

All the actions the National Park Service is considering will have an adaptive management approach, which provides flexibility to adjust to changing conditions. Park staff will continue monitoring and assessing the park's vegetation as the deer management plan progresses, and will make modifications to the plan to help ensure that forest regeneration is achieved.

What are the options other than lethal control?

The following alternatives were analyzed in the FEIS:

- Follow existing management actions;
- Use combined non-lethal actions, such as large, fenced areas and reproductive control of does;
- Use combined lethal actions, which include sharpshooting as well as capture and euthanasia, and a combination of lethal and non-lethal actions.

If you use lethal reduction to remove a deer, what will you do with the meat?

The meat will be donated to local food banks and other organizations, consistent with NPS public health guidelines. As a result of the management operations to date, approximately 6,000 pounds of venison has been donated by the National Park Service to D.C. Central Kitchen. D.C. Central Kitchen is a non-profit organization that distributes prepared meals to homeless shelters and other facilities in the Metropolitan Washington, D.C. area.

If you use reproductive control, wouldn't that contaminate the meat?

If reproductive control was the chosen management action, the National Park Service would seek to use a reproductive control agent that is not retained within the animal. Current guidelines require that if such an agent is not available, the deer may not be consumed. If this

is the chosen alternative, the National Park Service would follow all applicable guidelines from state and federal agencies.

This park is part of an urban environment that has changed dramatically over time. How can you say you are trying to reach a “natural” environment?

In 2007, the National Park Service completed work on a general management plan (GMP) for Rock Creek Park. During the planning process for the GMP, the public made clear that they value preservation of the park’s natural resources as highly as its cultural resources.

As the area around Rock Creek Park becomes more developed, the park is increasingly important as a refuge for plants and wildlife. It’s critical – as well as required by NPS management policies -- that the natural resources which sustain the park’s wildlife be protected. In addition, although the park is indeed part of an urban environment, natural processes still occur in the park. Tree regeneration is one of these natural processes and is necessary to sustain the forest into the future.

There are many factors that affect forest regeneration. Why focus on the deer?

Data from vegetation monitoring plots in the park clearly demonstrates that high deer population density is limiting the growth and maturation of the park’s forests. This conclusion has been mirrored in extensive research that has been conducted on the effects of overabundant deer populations in other areas of the country. Young trees and shrubs in Rock Creek Park grow to only a few inches tall before being eaten by deer and other herbivores. Restoration of the park’s forest will take place when the deer browsing pressure is reduced to the point at which forests can regenerate.

What is the cost of implementing the selected alternative?

The first year of deer management cost \$5,712.07 for one night of sharpshooting. For the second year of deer management (fall/winter 2013-2014), these costs were \$37,900.35. In the third year of deer management (fall/winter 2014-2015), these costs amounted to \$14,635.58. In the fourth year of deer management (fall-winter 2015-2016), these costs were \$6,306.20. During the following years, when the park will be focusing on maintaining deer population levels, the FEIS projects that the annual cost will likely be between \$62,216 and \$72,616.

Who is paying for this?

The money comes to the Department of Interior through Congressional appropriation.

How will you protect the public during this process?

The park's top priority is the safety of park visitors, neighbors, and staff. Extensive safety measures will be put into place to ensure a safe, humane, and successful operation. It is critical to public safety that only qualified and experienced personnel conduct all lethal activities. Therefore, the NPS will work with specially trained biologists from the United States Department of Agriculture's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, Wildlife Services branch (USDA WS). The USDA WS has a long history of conducting safe and effective actions to reduce wildlife populations, including the reduction of deer populations using firearms and other lethal methods, at multiple locations in the Washington metropolitan area and other populated areas nationwide. To further improve safety, the National Park Service will:

- Conduct lethal reduction activities from November through March and after dark, when the park is closed;
- Conduct all activities involving firearms in compliance with federal firearm laws administered by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives;
- Use bait to attract deer in safe locations that will be approved by NPS personnel and will be located away from public areas;
- Prohibit lethal reduction activities from taking place within established safety zones along the park boundary, open roadways, and occupied buildings;
- Conduct shooting actions from an elevated position – for example, an elevated position such as a hilltop or truck bed -- and with earthen backstops when possible;
- Use specialized ammunition that minimizes the travel range of the bullet and that does not contain lead; and
- Position NPS and United States Park Police personnel to patrol the park during removal actions to ensure compliance with park closures and public safety measures and to provide field expertise to accompanying USDA WS teams, among other actions.

Will the NPS provide more specific information on when and where these activities are taking place?

The National Park Service's top priority is safety. To make this action as safe as possible for park visitors, neighbors, staff, and motorists, the National Park Service will share specific information on these actions with local law enforcement and other state and local officials to ensure coordination. The details of implementation -- including what, when, and where actions on the ground will take place -- will not be provided to the public. National Park Service staff

will work closely with local and state officials to implement a comprehensive communications strategy that ensures public safety.

I love seeing the deer. Will I still be able to see deer when I'm in the park?

This management plan does not eliminate deer from Rock Creek Park. Rather, it is designed to bring the deer population to a level that allows the park's forest to regenerate. White-tailed deer were part of Rock Creek Park's ecosystem before Colonial-era settlers came to the region. Future generations of park visitors will continue to have the opportunity to see deer in the park.

Are there any other National Park Service areas that have done or are doing deer management?

Several other national parks are actively managing deer: Gettysburg National Military Park (Pa.), Catocin Mountain Park (Md.), Antietam National Battlefield (Md.), Monocacy National Battlefield (Md.), Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore (Ind.), and Valley Forge National Historical Park (Pa.). Several other parks are developing deer management plans. These include Cuyahoga Valley National Park (Ohio), Manassas National Battlefield Park (Va.), Fire Island National Seashore (N.Y.), Chesapeake and Ohio Canal (DC, Md., W.Va.), and Harpers Ferry (W.Va., Va., Md.).

How can I keep updated on deer management in Rock Creek Park?

Rock Creek Park will issue press releases to announce management actions and post this information on the park's website (<http://www.nps.gov/rocr>). Information also can be obtained by contacting the park's deer management information line 202-895-6009.